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A VERGILIAN LINE

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Vergil's *Aeneid* I 462,

sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt,

has evoked considerable praise. Mackail calls it "the most famous of his single lines." Tyrrell says it strikes "one with a sense of wondrous beauty and pathetic dignity." Woodberry describes *lacrimae rerum* as the best known and the central phrase of the *Aeneid* and asserts that it might be regarded as the other name of the poem. Others refer to it as the finest verse in Latin poetry. But a curious thing in this chorus of praise is the fact that there are wide differences as to the meaning of the line. Is the beauty of the line to be found in a clear and definite thought or is it due to some elusive quality, some vague and mystic element which but half-reveals some deep and important thought of the poet? Vergil certainly had the capacity to express weighty ideas by suggestion, and this well known habit of the poet has led some to think that such was his intention here.

It is a temptation to give these words the finer and more poetical interpretation but a due consideration of the points involved leads to the acceptance of another interpretation, perhaps more prosaic, but the more obvious one and the one ordinarily accepted and apparently never questioned until another meaning occurred to Henry's poetic mind. The obvious interpretation regards *rerum* as practically equivalent to the following *mortalia*, in the sense of human fortunes, and as an objective genitive dependent upon the verb idea of weeping involved in *lacrimae*. Thus construed the sense of the line is, "Here are tears for man's adversities and mortal affairs touch the heart."

Later editors and critics have probably been influenced by Henry who objected to the hitherto accepted interpretation. He bases his objections on the following considerations: 1. That *res* without a qualifying attribute cannot mean adversity. 2. That if *res* does mean adversity, *hic etiam* of the preceding line should

be repeated. 3. That where the words *lacrimae rerum* occur again, they cannot possibly mean "tears for adversities." Therefore, Henry finds the line and situation capable of bearing another thought, a thought that is really Vergilian in its beauty and pathos: "Tears are universal, belong to the constitution of nature, and the evils of mortality move the human heart."

Glover apparently adopts Henry's interpretation. He says that Vergil makes it clear that the question of human sorrow "is no accidental or easy one, no side issue, but that it goes to the very depth of man's being and is an integral element of the problem of the universe." (page 319). This is clearly his interpretation of *lacrimae rerum*. Mackail probably had the same conception: "In the most famous of his single lines he speaks of the 'tears of things,' just this sense of tears, this voice that always, in its most sustained splendour and in its most ordinary cadences, vibrates with a strange pathos, is what finally places him alone among artists." (page 103.) Woodberry also shares this belief: "Here are the tears of time. *Lacrimae rerum* seems almost the other name of the *Aeneid*; . . . he was the first to strike that parallel chord of world-woe which has reverberated down all after ages." (Great Writers, page 134.) Matthew Arnold's interpretation is probably the same:

"the Virgilian cry
The sense of tears in mortal things." (Geist's Grave.)

And so apparently also Duff: "There is in Vergil already more than a presage of the Weltschmerz. *Sunt lacrimae* were words born of personal brooding over sorrow." (page 460.) Wordsworth in his *Laodamia* evidently had the *lacrimae rerum* passage in mind:

"Yet tears to human suffering are due;
And mortal hopes defeated and o'erthrown
Are mourned by man, and not by man alone,
As fondly he believes."

His interpretation seems at first to conflict with that of Henry and of the others mentioned, but as he later shows the sympathies of the trees "whose tall summits are withered at the sight," it is possible that he regards the inanimate things of the universe (*rerum*) as feeling with man in his adversities, that is, that his view becomes identical with that of Henry.

Henry could have strengthened his position and gained consistency by making *mentem* refer to the heart of the universe rather than to the heart of man, thus: "Tears belong to the universe (*rerum*) and mortal ills touch its heart." Henry might have cited as proof of Vergil's *anima mundi* belief the famous lines from VI 724-7:

principio caelum ac terram camposque liquentis
 lucentem globum, lunam Titaniaque astra
 spiritus intus alit, totamque infusa per artus
 mens agitat molem et magno se corpore miscet.

It is quite possible that what the poet has in the later book represented didactically he has here suggested in his allusive style. There is then no intrinsic difficulty in giving this line the meaning offered by Henry. But the use of *res* so vividly personified would be very strange and perhaps unparalleled. Rivers, mountains, seas, and stars may readily be personified because of the mythic element involved, but *res* is at the farthest remove from such an association. But in answer to this it may be said that if a *mens* is ascribed to the *moles* and to the *magnum corpus* of the universe, it may just as readily be attributed to the neutral *res*. This line of argument leaves us about where we were, excepting that as Henry's interpretation is the less obvious it would seem to need the stronger proof.

We note now Henry's objections to the usual interpretation.

1. That *res* unsupported by an attributive does not seem to mean adversity. True, *res* generally has a qualifying adjective as *adflictus*, *dubius*, and the like but there are exceptions to this practice. We need look no farther back than I 178 for such an exception, *fessi rerum*, "wearied with adversities." *Res* is a colorless word and may borrow significance from its associations. So here the close association of *lacrimae* and *mortalia* directs its meaning more readily into that of 'adversities' than into that of 'the universe.' This interpretation is assisted by the parallelism of the two halves of the line, "There are tears for man's adversities, and mortal ills touch the heart." The interlocked arrangement of the words bears out such an interpretation, *lacrimae* and *mentem* representing the expression or the centre of the emotion, and *rerum* and *mortalia*,

its cause. 2. That if *res* means adversities, *hic etiam* should be repeated. This seems to resolve itself into a matter of punctuation. Conington, Ribbeck, and others place a semi-colon after *laudi* of the preceding line. It seems far better to replace the semi-colon with a comma, as Benoist, Knapp, Fairclough, and others have it. Thus, *hic etiam* would apply equally to the two clauses. This clearly seems to have been the interpretation of Donatus on the line: *sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi, sunt lacrimae rerum et ipsa propositio est; nam specialiter dicturus est quae laudanda vel quae dolenda sint*. That is, "here are rewards for things which deserve praise and tears for things deserving pity." 3. That where the words *lacrimae rerum* occur again they cannot possibly mean 'tears for adversities.' As the writer referred to (Venantius Fortunatus) lived six centuries after Vergil and wrote under conditions utterly different from those of Vergil's life, it does not seem that we need be influenced by his interpretation of these words. Thus, it seems to me that Henry's objections have less validity than we would expect from a scholar of his penetration.

Tyrrell (Latin Poetry, 147 ff) while in general inclining to Henry's interpretation suggests another which really does violence to that of Henry. Tyrrell thinks that the *rerum* may refer to the material picture and that *mortalia* may mean the 'works of man's hands.' Therefore, according to Tyrrell, the poet means: "E'en things inanimate can weep for us, and the works of man's hands have their own pathetic power." The line just below,

sic ait atque animum pictura pascit inani,

'then on the lifeless painting he feeds his heart,' he thinks is in accord with his interpretation. It is hard to see what 'new and exquisite fancy' there could be in the thought that the material picture, the painting on canvas, the statue, or whatever other symbolic form there may be, may sympathize with man and that man may find satisfaction in such a circumstance. I believe the poet's mind was concerned in something more fundamental than this, in the thought back of the symbol rather than in the symbol itself.

Still another point of view is found in Stebbing's fanciful interpretation:

"There is spirit immortal that mounts up on high;
 Yet reaches longing hands back to hopes left to die;
 There are things that are tears; there are tears that are things;
 There are tears that are water and tears that are wings."

We need not suppose that Stebbing insisted on this interpretation as representing exactly the thought of the poet. But it does seem clear that he regards the line as indicating in the mind of Vergil a purpose of identifying things with tears, that is, of making sorrow the essence of the universe. Tears and the sorrow they express are the ultimate realities, and, conversely, the material objects of the universe have a spiritual significance expressed in terms of suffering. This interpretation merely carries out into fuller detail the views of Woodberry and others, indicated above.

However attractive the views of Henry and of his followers may be, I believe the situation requires the other interpretation, the one usually accepted. The incident is one of commemoration. The commemorative instinct of the Romans is amply illustrated by their countless monuments. They conveyed a sort of immortality on those commemorated. Vergil represents that Aeneas coming thus unexpectedly upon the reminders of the events in which he had been a great part feels the hope immortal springing up within him:

solve metus; feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem.

Fama is the commemorative idea and gives significance to the preceding lines. Even here in this remote place of earth (the far extent of fame is a familiar notion in Latin) fame has rewards for the worthy, here pity for man's adversities has produced these commemorative devices, and mortal ills touch the heart of man so as to commemorate them thus. Though the substance of life is lost, a fame like this will bring some measure of safety. True, the picture is empty for after all it is but a commemorative device, a shadow, as it were, of the lost substance, yet he feeds his soul upon it, and his own tears gush forth in sympathy with those which prompted the works of commemoration. This interpretation of *lacrimae rerum* accords well with the context and with the general Roman attitude toward commemoration, and I feel certain must be the one Vergil intended.